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Fighting a Different Battle: Challenges Facing American Indians in Higher Education

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Introduction

Educational access and attainment are among the most pressing issues facing Indian Country. Of particular challenge are those of post secondary education. American Indian students are retained and graduated from colleges at rates far below their non-Native peers. Making a successful adjustment to college is a formidable challenge for many people. It is particularly challenging for American Indian students.

The enrollment, retention, and graduation rates for American Indians are lower than any other ethnic group. Leaving college prior to completion of a degree signals delayed or forgone personal aspirations and often diminished opportunities. The attrition of these students also has a negative impact on their campus communities because their absence diminishes the multi- and cross-cultural educational potential the learning environment has for all students (Larimore, 2005).

The challenge of student retention does not begin with college enrollment. According to Tierney (1992), more than 40% of American Indians students leave school without a high school diploma. Of those that do graduate, slightly more than one-third will ever enroll in college, compared to nearly two-thirds of their non-Native peers.

There are several reasons for the low number of Indian students in college: the lack of high school graduates; non-existing or inadequate programs and services, a lack of administrative support where the student attends college; faculty misconceptions and stereotyping; and poor student relations with the college institution and other students.

Low numbers of high school graduates is one logical explanation for the reduced numbers of students in college. Jones and Wong (1975) studied the high school drop-out rates among American Indians and reported that underrepresentation in college was due primarily to educational disparity: (i.e., lack of access to resources, lack of comparable educational funding between Caucasian and minority youths). As long as there are fewer students meeting college entrance requirements there will be a reduction in the number of American Indians graduating from colleges and universities.

Factors Impacting Persistence and Graduation

A combination of cultural and educational challenges contributes to this attrition. Cultural identity, social norming, educational support mechanisms, unique student learning styles including Native ways of knowing, have been proven to impact the academic success of the American Indian college student. (Pewewardy, 2002).

Although there are a number of theories on American Indian retention, there remains much uncertainty about the real factors that influence American Indian students' ability to persist in college. Several studies have identified family support, supportive faculty and staff, institutional and personal commitment, and connections to culture as key factors in persistence. (Tate & Schwartz, 1993; Reyhner, J. & Dodd, J., 1995; Huffman, 2001). Many of these studies have also identified a number of obstacles including inadequate academic preparation, unclear and/or ill-defined academic or vocational goals, insufficient financial aid, incongruence between high school and college environments, prejudice, and social isolation.

Huffman (2001) suggested that Native American students who are able to draw strength from their cultural identity while adapting to the demands of college life are more likely to succeed in their academic pursuits than either culturally assimilated students or those unable to establish a level of comfort within their campus environment. However, American Indian culture can foster certain traits that may be problematic for Indian students to successfully acclimate to the college environment. For example, tribal elders promote a strong sense of personal independence that may ultimately result in loneliness when the student refuses to seek help in adjusting to this new environment. The pressure to assimilate into the college environment often conflicts with tribal culture and results in internalized conflict that hinders students from persisting and completing degrees.

Call to Action

As minority enrollment has more than doubled in the past thirty years, the retention and graduation rates of American Indian students have remained lower than other minority groups. It is evident that American Indian students experience barriers to their access and completion of a college degree.

Student success in college requires contributions from many groups. As early as elementary and secondary school, students should be encouraged to plan for college and participate in college preparatory curricula. Tutoring programs in the areas of mathematics, science, and reading should be provided. Teacher education programs should implement training in culturally sensitive pedagogies to address the cultural distinctiveness of American Indian students. High school guidance counselors should help students seek academic enrichment opportunities provide to exposure to the level of the college academic rigor.

Colleges should work with local tribal governments and other community programs to improve outreach efforts to American Indian students and their parents. They should also establish relationships with TCUs and community

colleges to facilitate student transfers agreements and provide opportunities for student and faculty exchange programs.

It is important for colleges to foster a campus culture conducive to understanding and respecting Native cultures. Colleges should support the identities of American Indian students. This process begins with educating faculty and staff to Native culture and native student learning. An understanding of native cultures will help establish positive relationships with these students. A supportive campus environment, working to service their individual needs, will prove conducive to positive experiences for American Indian students during the first year and beyond to the completion of their degree.

First-year programs are critical to the retention of American Indian students. The integration of academic services also plays a critical role in the success of freshman students. Structured first-year programs with developmental/remedial courses serve to benefit American Indian students during this difficult transitional year. (Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cinton, 2007). Colleges should create special social networks to support American Indian students and their families in order to make the necessary connections with the university environment and encourage first-year students, particularly, to network with other American Indian students on the campus. Establishing a connection to the university community is critical to the first-year experience of American Indian students. This is particularly important to students who find the college experience as the first time away from their families and some may have never experienced exposure beyond the tribal communities.

Another important factor to establishing these positive relationships with American Indian students involves the recruitment and retention of American Indian faculty and staff. A network of American Indian faculty and staff in universities offer these connections to the Native cultures that serve to strengthen the relationship between campuses and tribal communities.

Best practices in retention programs for American Indian students value the important sphere of influence and role of family and community by offering flexible policies that permit students to maintain their familial and tribal obligations as they work to balance the challenges of college curricula.

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